

Remarks of Ambassador Feinstein at the American School of Warsaw's Commencement

May 29, 2010

I would like to thank the American School of Warsaw for inviting me here to speak. You have warmly welcomed Elaine, our family, and me to this diverse, international community and, as an international family ourselves, you have given us a home away from home, and we are very grateful. Thank you very much.

President Gerald Ford's speechwriter said some time ago that a graduation ceremony is an event where the commencement speaker tells a huge group of students, dressed in identical caps and gowns, that *individuality* is the key to success.

Well those words may be true -- individuality may be the key to success. But what is the measure of success now? And what does it mean to be true to ourselves; to be true to our convictions? And how do we stick to our convictions, or challenge or them, when the world of the 21st century moves so fast and unpredictably?

For answers to questions like these, I give you, the class of 2010, bound for many of the world's most elite institutions, a bit of research advice. Check out some children's books.

First, they're short. Second, they have a lot of pictures. And, third, they get to the point pretty directly.

I am the proud parent of a member of the ASW class of 2022. So, children's books are now my main source of research. There's a book Elaine and I read to our soon to be first grader and his very inquisitive little sister. It's called the Peace Book. For the literary scholars in the room, the author is Todd Parr, and it's published by Little Brown. Maybe some of you have read it to your little sisters or brothers.

It's not about peace at all. If anything, it's about being at ease with yourself and with your place in the world. The last page is a sensitive thing in our house. My son has banned me from reading the last line of the book. "Dad it's too embarrassing." (I was, for the record, never embarrassed by my parents, and I'm sure you have never been either).

The last page is two sentences long. It goes like this: "Peace is being different; feeling good about yourself; and helping others."

And now the banned final line, and the end of my overly long windup:

"The world is a better place because of YOU."

YOU, by the way is in all capital letters, followed by an exclamation point. I like that last line.

"The world is a better place because of YOU." That's an idea and a belief to hold onto, now as much as ever.

I graduated from high school in the Mesozoic era, also know as 1977. I tell you that not to show you how old I am, but to present a comparison.

When I graduated from high school, the world seemed to be in a static place. When I was born in 1959, there was a Cold War. When I graduated from high school there was a Cold War. When I graduated from college in 1981, still Cold War. And, except for some courageous people, especially in Poland (I will get back to that later) and other places, not many people imagined there could be a third wave of democracy that would transform the world, which it did. And those who thought they could see the possibility of a different future and were brave enough to write about it were often considered fringe, unscholarly, sort of the last people you'd pick to be on your team.

Technology seemed to move as slowly as geopolitics. When I left for college, I lugged a milk crate of records, we called them albums then, and yes they are much cooler and sound much better than CDs or MP3s, but they are so much heavier to carry. I brought along a manual Underwood typewriter, which was also very cool, but incredibly impractical. The stuff I lugged to my college dorm room was more or less what my oldest brother took with him to college in the black and white era of 1965. Cell phones, the internet, IPODS, and laptops were only on Star Trek.

Of course, change was happening. Some of it we could see. The face of change was evident in some areas, like civil rights, and under the surface in others, like geopolitics and technology.

My brother, for example, entered college with a requirement to wear a shirt and tie at dinner; and by the time of his graduation in 1969, well, he was definitely not wearing a tie at dinner or any other time. I went to Vassar College in 1977. Vassar didn't admit men in 1965, it was the sister school to Yale. But the women's movement had reached the rarified world of higher education by the 70s and Vassar, like Yale, went co-ed; and in a minor act of protest, I opted for a liberal arts school with no fraternities; an accordion file for a career planning office, and ultimate Frisbee as the main sport.

The world we live in, at the time of your graduation, is very different. Change, fast and unpredictable change, not stasis, is now what we expect. As President Clinton used to say, the test you will face will be to make change your friend. And I would add, to make change your friend while sticking to your beliefs and convictions along the way.

Your job will be to adjust rapidly to an ever-changing world that is moving in unpredictable directions. You will be tested repeatedly, and so will your convictions.

Fortunately, being in Poland, and in this school, have given you a leg up. There may be no better place to show the importance of holding tightly to one's values, convictions, and integrity than here in Warsaw, where history asserts itself on every street corner. There may be no place where doubters of change have been proven more wrong than here.

Our school's transformation since the Cold War is a great parable for Poland's transformation.

During the Cold War, the American School of Warsaw was one of the few places where students could engage in a free, uncensored exchange of ideas. That is the main reason the communist authorities did not allow Polish students to enroll here. Greg Ness, an alumnus who attended the American School at that time, recalled in an interview a few years back that it seemed "perfectly natural" to be followed around by the secret police, to walk past buildings still riddled with bullet holes from World War II, and to be limited in grocery stores to only two heads of lettuce per family per month.

Because Poles were barred from enrolling, most of the students at the American School were children of diplomats. There were virtually no opportunities for non-Polish students to interact with Poles their own age.

Back then, the school was so small that it fit inside the dilapidated apartment building across the street from the American Embassy. The athletic facilities consisted of a ping-pong table, a four-square court, a swing set, and a rocky vacant lot.

After the establishment of the first Solidarity government, the American School, like Poland itself, quickly changed, transforming itself from a refuge for Westerners into a center of educational excellence for people like all of you.

Twenty-one years after the fall of communism, the school's diversity reflects Poland's growing economic and cultural diversity. Less than 20% of students at the *American School of Warsaw* are Americans. Close to 20% are Poles. More than 10% of you come from countries in Asia.

The American School played an important role in Poland's transition to a democratic free market economy by delivering a first-rate education to future entrepreneurs, political leaders, and community organizers. It taught students to think critically, to challenge authority, and to make sure their voice was heard.

Today, you and your school are a model in promoting a global outlook and in emphasizing community outreach. You have helped to raise money to build a sister school for victims of the earthquake in Haiti, helped to restore Jewish memory in cooperation with the Museum of the History of Polish Jews' Virtual Shtetl project, and the 10th grade has even helped to lengthen bike paths in town.

In that regard you all have something in common with my current ultimate boss. In his speeches and books, President Obama frequently talks about his own experience as a community organizer. He has said that no one nation, no one person, can solve the world's problems on their own. In today's interdependent world, we must do more than work together; we must understand that we have a responsibility to one another.

One of the things I am proudest of in my career is that before becoming Ambassador, I wrote and worked to support and promote the principle of the "responsibility to protect." This principle, endorsed by the United Nations in 2005, is the idea that mass atrocities that take place in one country are the responsibility of all countries. While few would question the moral necessity of taking action to prevent genocide, historically -- and tragically -- this not been enough to compel

states to act. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, President Obama explored the tense, difficult relationship between war and peace. Some of course were disappointed, even angry, that Obama did not condemn war and violence outright. Instead, he eloquently explained that sometimes force is not only necessary but morally justified: "To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history; of the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."

Your understanding of this complex issue has been greatly enhanced by going to school here. Poles suffered greater losses than any other nation during World War II. Leaders of the Third Reich perpetrated the greatest crime in history on occupied Polish soil. Yet Polish-Jewish and Polish-Catholic couriers, like Jan Karski, risked their lives to bring the first news about mass atrocities to the outside world. Their message was simple and clear: "Forces of evil are committing mass murder. You have a responsibility to stop them." Another Polish heroine, Irena Sendler, risked her life to smuggle thousands of Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto to the safety.

The courage and sacrifice of Jan Karski, Irena Sendler, and thousands of other Poles who sacrificed so much to help others during World War II are an example for all of us. Their legacy serves as a reminder of our own responsibility to others. The responsibility to protect is not something for countries to debate within the UN. Poles, like Americans, get this. Since 1989, Poles have readily accepted and acted on their responsibility to promote freedom, democracy, and human rights and to plant the seeds of future prosperity outside their borders. As Poland's Foreign Minister likes to say, "It's in [the] national DNA."

Our school has given you a million advantages to prepare you for the challenges of this century. You've received a first-rate education, and most of you have done it outside of your home country. That's remarkable. Some of you have been accepted to the very best schools in the world, including Stanford, Cambridge, NYU, Boston University, University of California Berkeley, University College London, University of Michigan, and another of my alma maters, Georgetown University.

While the future is full of promise, nothing is guaranteed. Despite your excellent preparation, there will be times when adversity tests your faith in yourself. It will test your values. Remember, life is not just about passing the test. It's not about punching a ticket. Of course, punching a ticket could bring you financial or political success, but more often than not it will just leave you angry and frustrated. Instead, start with what you want to do and go from there. As Bob Dylan once said, "When you feel in your gut what you are and then dynamically pursue it, don't back down and don't give up."

As you follow your own path to success, however you choose to define it, don't turn your back on others. Don't lose sight of your greater responsibility. I'll quote Bob Dylan one more time. In an interview on heroism, Dylan said, "I think of a hero as someone who understands the degree of responsibility that comes with his freedom." As you head to university, remember what you've learned here -- not just from your teachers -- but from studying together as international students, and by absorbing the history you have been able to experience in Warsaw.

I'll leave you with the words of Todd, from the Peace Book. Today my challenge to you – and to myself – is to make sure the world is a better place because of YOU. Be confident; hold on to your values; and remember your responsibility to others. Thank you.